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International Office Bids Farewell to Stellar Co-Worker

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Javier Chagoya | May 28, 2020



A December 2007 photo captures just how hectic the check-in process can get as new international students arrive in the International Graduate Programs Office in Herrmann Hall. At the center of the action is NPS International Student Administrative Coordinator Debbie Graham, who will celebrate her retirement after 30 years of federal service in June.

When NPS new hire Debbie Graham started working in the International Graduate Programs Office (IGPO) in late April 1990, the Space Shuttle Discovery, STS-31, had just launched, delivering the Hubble Space Telescope into low Earth orbit. Graham's performance at NPS in the three decades since has also been stellar, and she is now preparing for her own launch ...into retirement.

Graham's job then, as it is now, is to shepherd arriving international students through the travails any foreigner faces arriving into a new country, notwithstanding the rigors of absorbing postgraduate coursework in a recently acquired language. Then, take into account the cultural divide.

Some delegations number up to 20, while other countries can only send one officer to NPS. But Graham is the constant, and has been responsible for assisting thousands of foreign nationals from as many as 55 countries per quarter throughout her tenure.

“As International Student Administrative Coordinator, Debbie demonstrates organization, compassion, conscientiousness, selflessness, attention to detail and an undying devotion to her students,” said co-worker Kim Andersen, who is the international special programs administrator for the IGPO.

Prior to Graham’s arrival to NPS, she was a military spouse accustomed to moves to foreign lands. She worked in the DOD school system in Germany during her husband’s first tour of duty and then at the post library in a succeeding tour there. So, you might say she was destined to work in an office with an international flavor, learning of places and people with exotic names like Mauritius and Seychelles. In her job, Graham has had the benefit of traveling the world without ever leaving her desk.

One of her collateral duties is to serve as lead escort for field studies program activities. And this job *does* get Graham away from the office, taking as many as 80 students and their spouses on off-campus treks to learn about the history of the surrounding area. Some of her trips include escorting students to the nation’s capital as part of their cultural awareness indoctrination of U.S. customs and monuments.

According to IGPO records, Graham will have engaged with 5,153 international officers between her May 1, 1990 beginning, until her retirement on June 30, 2020.

It has been a career with so many rewards, she says. Graham savors the hard work behind the scenes, as she prefers modesty over pretentiousness. She has countless Special Act and Performance Awards to her credit.

“Debbie puts the international students ahead of herself often working nights and weekends at the office or bringing homework to make sure every international student has what they need to succeed,” said International Military Student Officer IGPO Supervisor Kathleen Noyes. “When it comes to the ‘internationals,’ she cares for them like they are family.”

For the IGPO Team, it will be hard to fill the position Graham has occupied and who has given of herself with so much care. The IGPO constantly receives e-mails from both alumni and country attachés thanking the staff for the help they have provided and what a difference it made for them in their academic and social bearings.

“Debbie’s departure will leave a huge hole in the fabric of the IGPO staff,” said Director IGPO Al Scott. “Over her decades of service, Debbie earned a well-deserved reputation for quietly and expertly doing whatever it took to take care of our international students. As a result, she positively impacted the lives of literally thousands of students from over 100

partner nations, all of whom left with a greater appreciation of the U.S. due to her efforts. We will deeply miss her experience and commitment to the well-being of our international students and her fellow IGPO staff members.”

Graham has had the pleasure of working with students who have gone on to very senior positions of leadership.

The list includes Chief of Staff, French Navy Adm. Christophe Prazuck, (Class of June 1991); Bahraini Minister for Foreign Affairs Lt. Gen. (ret.) Abdullatif Al Zayani, (Class of September 1996); Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bahamas Hon. Darren Henfield, (Class of December 2015) and Hon. Emmanuel Yonny Kulendi, who is now in the nomination process to the Ghanaian Supreme Court (Class of December 1997).

Graham’s job has even crossed generations. One of her students who graduated in 2010 is Georgian First Deputy Minister of Defense, Ms. Lela Chikovani. Last year, her son Tornike Chikovani of the Georgian State Security Service checked in with Graham, and is enrolled in NPS’ National Security Affairs department with an expected graduation in December 2020.

“I think she’s [Graham] wonderful and I’m sad to see her go,” said co-worker Erin Ferguson. “She takes with her corporate knowledge that spans three decades. No one will ever be able to replace her, especially all her ‘Debbie-isms,’! I have an entire list of her most memorable sayings.”

“‘You put me in a pickle.’ That’s something Debbie would say when students want her to re-route their flights through secondary countries or change their airline completely,” added co-worker Jenny Stevens.

And just like she has adapted to working conditions in the wake of COVID-19, Graham now has to adapt to more time for grandchildren and perhaps taking off to some of those countries whose residents have already been by her desk.